
**Society of Architectural
Historians
Southern California Chapter**

Review

EDWARD HUNTSMAN-TROUT, LANDSCAPE ARCHITECT

BY LYNN BRYANT



*Figure 1 - Swimming
Pool of "Dios Dorados,"
the Ince Ranch (1923).*

There were few landscape architects in Southern California at the turn of the century. Not until the boom years of the teens and twenties did a sizeable number of people well trained in the field arrive and begin practice. They approached their work with both the enthusiasm of new immigrants and a sophistication which revealed their academic training in Europe or in the Northeast, under such influential figures as Andrew Jackson Downing and Frederick Law Olmsted. Together these newcomers developed an approach to landscape design which became known, not surprisingly, as the California Style.

Edward Huntsman-Trout was prominent among this group. His career as a Southern California landscape architect extended from 1920 to the early 1970's. During this time of extraordinary growth and change in Southern California, Huntsman-Trout was a prominent designer of residential estates and other non-residential commissions.

Huntsman-Trout's list of projects is a realtor's dream of fashionable addresses. Harvard trained and with early professional training at prestigious eastern firms, he was an ideal choice for collaboration with such leading period architects as Gordon Kaufmann, Wallace Neff, and Paul Williams. Huntsman-Trout's non-residential projects, such as the La Quinta Hotel, (1927: Gordon Kaufmann, arch.), Scripps College (1926: Gordon Kaufmann, arch.), and Bullocks Wilshire (1929: John and Donald Parkinson), were for clients who lived in, or aspired to, the great estates.

Though Huntsman-Trout was born just outside Toronto, he moved with his family to Florida, then California; Huntsman-Trout was an early alumnus of Hollywood High. He attended UC Berkeley, where in 1913 he received a degree in Botany. His graduate work at Harvard included courses in both architecture and landscape architecture. A major influence on his development was the work of Harvard

instructor Charles Platt, who in turn was influenced by Renaissance and Baroque Italian landscape architects; the primary goal was that of creating a clear spatial organization which glorified the natural terrain.

When Huntsman-Trout left Harvard he served in World War I, worked in two landscape architectural firms, those of Fletcher Steele in Boston and A.D. Taylor in Cleveland, and returned to California. Once here, he was hired by the Beverly Hills Nursery, one of some fifteen nurseries in Southern California with design staffs. During the 1920's Beverly Hills Nursery "had nine landscape architects going out of there every day, and a hundred men and trucks and equipment leaving ...every day to do the gardens." Huntsman-Trout stayed for about three years before he left to begin his own firm. Among his first independent commissions was Dios Dorados (1923). Also known as the Ince Ranch, Dios Dorados, designed for movie director Thomas Ince, was a flamboyant exercise in the emerging California Style. This style was derived from historic precedents found in the Mission gardens and in Mediterranean and other arid climates. Drought-tolerant plants were to replace water-loving ones. These plants, with courtyards and patios, were to take the place of lawns; fountains could provide the cooling effect of lawns while actually requiring less water. This philosophy, with its explicit reliance on historic precedent, responded to client preferences. Its direct response to existing climatic conditions appealed to Huntsman-Trout.

"I think he cared very much about Southern California's natural landscape. To him it was very beautiful and he felt not only that the land should be graded so that the lot fitted in with the natural hills...he felt too that we should work on developing places that used materials that were naturally happy in our surroundings."

East Coast and European estates featured houses recalling Classical and Gothic traditions; their gardens often contained ornaments which alluded to a literary or a historical past. At Dios Dorados, the allusions were to the romanticized past created in *Ramona*, with a little *Robinson Crusoe* added. The house, sited atop a hill, was Spanish Colonial Revival in style. It was surrounded by native and exotic semi-tropical plants: California sycamores, oaks, and pittosporum, among others. These plants swept irregularly down the hillside to a swimming pool, built to resemble a natural pond with one side bordered by a sandy beach (Figure 1). The beach was thickly planted with palms and was surrounded by changing rooms, built to resemble grass shacks. The sand provided continuity with a contiguous area, the "Desert Garden." In this garden, with its cacti and Joshua trees, was set a version of the traditional English "folly," an artificial adobe ruin.

Part of the delight of Dios Dorados, the playful translation of the elements of the traditional European/Northeast estates to a new cultural and geographical locale, derived from Huntsman-Trout's familiarity with the older tradition. The Winnett Estate (1928-29) shows his handling of these elements in a more customary fashion. The Winnett Estate was located on the bluff overlooking Santa Monica Canyon. The plan shows a series of formal gardens, sited so as to celebrate the estate's spectacular location and views. Photographs reveal the estate's rich material textures and the intricate architectural detailing of the garden ornaments.

The Winnett site was L-shaped; it extended between San Vicente Boulevard and the bluff overlooking Santa Monica Canyon. The long angle was a series of five rectilinear areas of varying length and equal width, beginning with a tennis court and terminating with a promenade along the bluff. Two formal gardens separated the tennis court and promenade from the middle garden, the Long Garden. The Long Garden was an axial strip of lawn, with perennial borders to either side and a high wall with an ornate Italianate fountain at one end, the terminus of the major axis of the house. A cross axis extended from the house across a broad lawn, broken in an informal manner by large

trees, walkways, and a pond. A balustrade at the edge of the canyon terminated this axis and opened the garden to the view.

The irregularly-shaped Winnett site was made to seem regular by the placement of trees and garden walls in clear rectilinear patterns; the odd corners were planted with trees which helped define the boundaries of the site and direct the views. The site was further unified through the use of two major sight lines; one through the length of the house to the end of the Long Garden, the other through the center of the informal lawn area. A rich variety of spatial scale pervades the design, from the intimate corners of walkways, through the more spacious orchard, to the grand lawn where one's plunge into the canyon beyond was halted only by the low balustrade.

The historic references of the design are to types which are combined and romanticized so that several precedents are recalled; the sum perhaps made more inviting for the transformation. A multi-roofed service building (designed by Huntsman-Trout) which resembled a German hunting lodge actually housed pigeons, dogs, and presumably cars and a caretaker (Figure 2). The belvedere, a familiar feature in many Moorish and Italian gardens, was here kept almost secret. Hidden by trees and reached only by two minor walkways, its spectacular view through the canyon to the ocean was made more special by its unexpected appearance.

The extensive drawings and other documents which remain of the Winnett estate give some indication of the wide scope of responsibilities of the landscape architect during that era. Often he did the site plan; in some cases the architect seems merely to have designed a house for a blank space marked "house." The landscape architect frequently designed everything outside the foundation line, from patio paving to the aforementioned "hunting lodge." The landscape architect often began work on a project at its inception, in some instances even advising on the purchase of the property. In many cases he had his own crew of laborers and craftsmen to do the work, and his duties continued after the house and gardens were in place; continuing maintenance of estate grounds was often supervised by the landscape architect. His instructions to the head gardener and the gardening staff assured the maturation of the gardens according to the original intentions.

Huntsman-Trout's designs began with consideration of site conditions and an inventory of existing on-site plants to be retained; he was apparently far more likely than most of his contemporaries to accommodate existing conditions and mature plantings. Whenever possible he fenced the entire property; often all that remains of the estates are parts of these fences: a stone archway or a masonry wall topped by rusting wrought iron. A thick band of trees and hedges just inside this wall ensured privacy. Once inside this boundary, Huntsman-Trout worked to manifest his feeling for the site and the house. The Revival-style house was seldom a simple rectangular shape; wings sprouted in all directions to allow light and air throughout. The site immediately surrounding the house was regularized through placement of paving and formal gardens. Cars and service buildings were located to one side of the house, out of sight, while views from the house were to other sides, toward the formal gardens, auxiliary structures meant for viewing, distant hills and other "borrowed" scenery, and his own version of a lawn.

"Things were almost never used symmetrically....There was sort of a shaggy look.... Usually in private gardens there was no clipped lawn. He liked them to undulate, and not be evenly clipped....He loved the thing to have lots of leaves on it. He used lots of sycamores and he got very impatient with the extreme neatness and the "Beverly Hills look" -- the kelly green lawns in August, you know, when in Southern California you're supposed to have straw-colored lawns....

"He liked it to look as if it happened (on its own) and he had a great distrust of things that were terribly 'put.' But where symmetry was inevitable or appropriate, he wanted it that way."

Huntsman-Trout generally did not specify particular plants. With his extensive background in botany and horticulture he felt comfortable in making on-the-spot decisions as to what available plant materials would achieve the intended design effect. In anticipation of maintenance problems, he preferred plants that were drought-resistant, not particular about soil or feeding, and that would flourish with only routine attention.

First he chose trees; these established the basic elements of the design. Favorites were sycamores, oaks, and Brazilian peppers. Their asymmetrical growth habits, lack of conspicuous flowers, and muted leaf colors appealed to him and contributed to the desired "shaggy" effect, while the muted colors and general lack of conspicuous visual characteristics help turn attention from the individual trees toward the overall garden design.

Next, he chose shrubs and vines; these also reflected his concern that individual plant materials be subordinate to the overall plan. Large shrubs were often intermingled with trees. In addition, shrubs and vines of several species were mixed together. While Huntsman-Trout "felt that there was not the proper maintenance for most flowering material,"⁶ he frequently chose shrubs and vines that flowered readily, without careful feeding or pruning. Planting plans of the Winnett Estate (one of the few projects with specific plant lists) indicate some of his choices: Bailey acacia, leptospermum, fremontia, mock orange, pink melaleuca. Reference books refer to the growth habits of these plants as "rampant," "inclined to be rangy," "used to clamber into tall trees." The visual effect of so many bushes and vines fighting for space and flowering profusely must have been striking.

Small flowering plants, perennials and annuals, were chosen last. These were reserved as accents in areas bordering walkways and in the formal gardens near the house. Huntsman-Trout had no apparent preferences as to color and no prejudices about mixing color, though "he distinguished between the use of the word 'clash' and the word 'discord.' 'Sometimes,' he would say, 'clashing is wonderful.'"

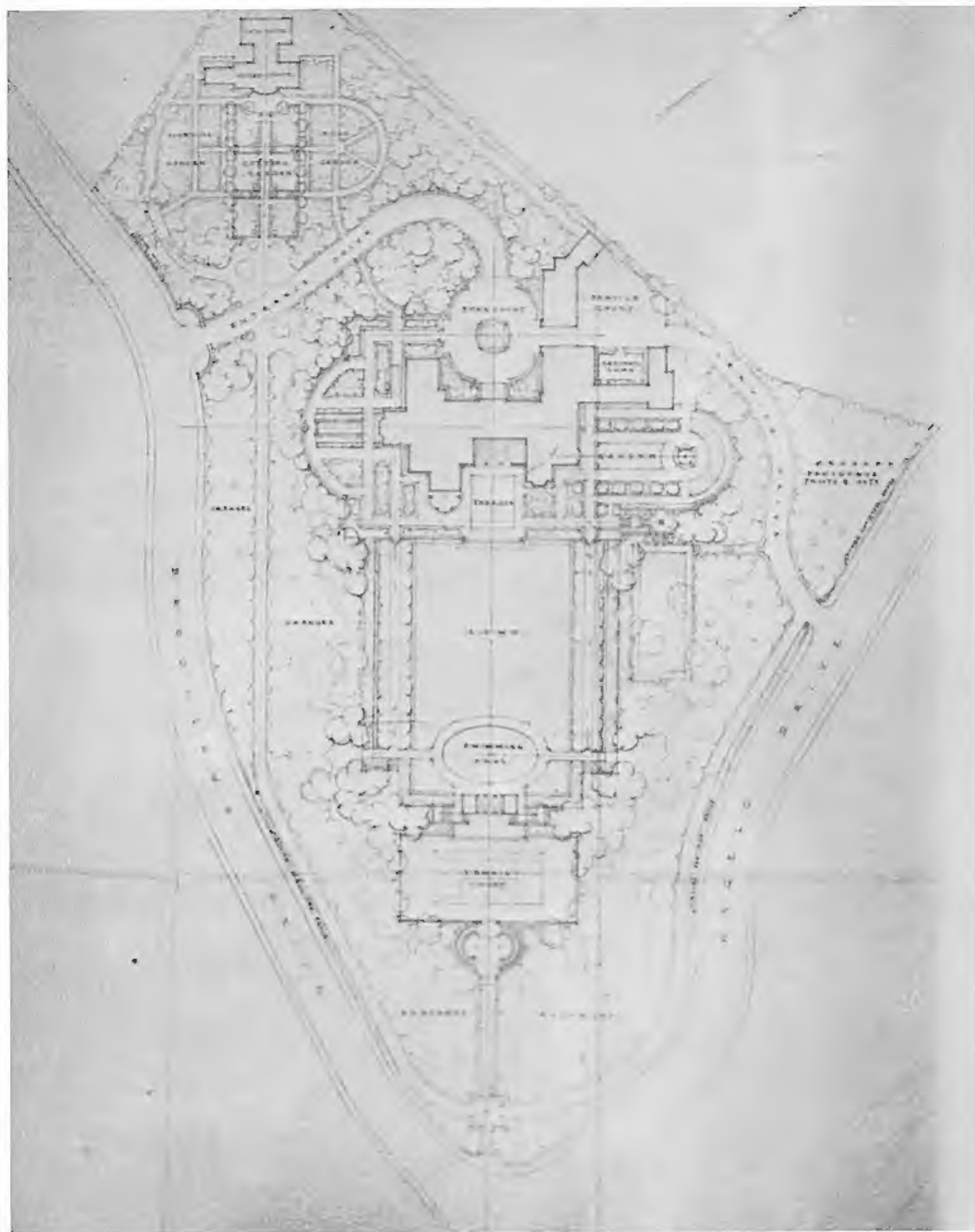
The Jay Poley estate (1935; Paul Williams, arch.) is among the last of the great estates, and among the few that are still essentially intact; the house sits on a site of six acres. While the plan exhibits the angular character and clear spatial organization of the Winnett estate, it also shows a free accommodation of site irregularities (Figure 3).

A curving driveway segregates the kitchen gardens from the ornamental ones. It leads the visitor to an ornately paved forecourt in front of the house, which begins the dominant axis. This axis penetrates the house and crosses a huge, unobstructed lawn to a swimming pool and a Hollywood Regency bath house (Figure 4). Beyond, on a lower level, the axis continues through a tennis court and along a walkway to the very edge of the property. In contrast, there are several cross axes through the house, which organize highly formal gardens. Most of the pedestrian circulation is peripheral; rather than leading directly from one location to another, it leads the visitor around the property. This is a characteristic of Huntsman-Trout's designs. It provides an ever-changing view along what could, in less skilled hands, become a static, boring path. Also, by not bisecting the plan, the spaciousness of the site is made more apparent. Trees at the outer edges of walks and driveways provide privacy and a sense of enclosure; an orchard of orange, avocado and other semi-tropical fruit trees fill the grounds between walkways and property boundaries.

The Depression lessened the size and extravagance of estate commissions. Rationing and other preparations for World War II ended the era.



Figure 2 - Service Building, Winnett Estate (1928-29).





Facing page, Figure 3 - Site Plan, Jay Paley Estate (1935 with Architect Paul Williams).

Above, Figure 4 - Pool and Bath House, Jay Paley Estate.

"A lot of people had lost their money and were living in more modest circumstances and they discovered what a job it was to live inside and out...And this was part of the Depression. When these moneyed people who had lost the excess...had to stay home, then they began to enjoy home. You had a patio outside, you had a place to eat outside and it was enough."

This adjustment to a simpler way of life, born of necessity, was to develop into a new set of ideals and a new aesthetic.

Huntsman-Trout spent World War II as a camouflager for Douglas Aircraft. His major initial responsibility was to camouflage the Douglas plant.

"Edward and Allen [architect Allen Siple]... went all over the roofs of everything....They finally decided they were going to make it (Douglas) look like a subdivision, because that was what everybody knew Los Angeles had, was subdivisions. So, with the help of another man,...they put chicken wire all over the top of Douglas, both where you would walk or run an airplane and where the building itself was....It gave a certain amount, because there is a lot of wind coming off the ocean, and it had to be able to withstand it. They put chicken feathers on it that they colored different ways. Around the 'houses' they put...clothes, so that it looked as if you had just put out the washing. Different colors and everything, painted up there on this chicken wire."

Only one defense project remains in Huntsman-Trout's collection, Project OO, a "Bomber Hide for Liberator or Flying Fortress." Project OO was a portable camouflage

tent, designed to disguise an airplane "where conditions are most severe." The camouflage cover was suspended from wires. This allowed the airplane to taxi easily beneath this semi-permanent structure and prevented the cover from sitting directly on the airplane and thus taking on its contours. It would be interesting to know whether this design was ever put into production.

After the war Huntsman-Trout returned to the same office location, but to a much changed profession. Immediately after World War II, there was an unprecedented building boom in Southern California. At the time it must have seemed as if every soldier who had passed through on his way to the South Pacific had returned to stay. In the 1940's the Los Angeles population increased by nearly one-half million, from 1,504,277 to 1,976,358. To accommodate this influx, entire cities, such as Lakewood, sprang from beanfields and cow pastures in a few years. Partly in an effort to hasten this process, the nature of subdivisions changed. In earlier land promotions, the developer more often sold improved lots; the client then hired his own architect or contractor. During the post-war boom, the developer took on large scale housing construction as well.

Huntsman-Trout adjusted at once to this new level of building activity. He was involved with seven subdivisions, in major or minor capacities. His commissions for private grounds actually increased in number; because each project was smaller, he could design more of them. Huntsman-Trout's post-war residential landscaping shows his continued interest in the California Style. While the individual appearance of each garden varied widely, certain concerns remained consistent. He minimized lawns; where he could he eliminated them. The front yard was typically given to an extremely generous driveway and parking court, often surrounded by natural-appearing trees and bushes. The back and side yard were filled with patios, pools, and

walkways. Drought tolerance remained a desired trait in plants. The interpenetration of interior and exterior space and the development of functional outdoor areas remained as goals.

"I send you enclosed with this two prints showing the approach grounds without swimming pool... The present straight-up drive seems to be a blight, and I propose to swing to the left...so as to allow the native cover to be the foreground for the first intimate view of the hill-hugging house...Trees here, redwood and others, and brush, will flatter the setting of the house, and will clothe the necessary grading so as to do no violence to the hill....

"A swimming pool close to the door would be very popular, but I feel that you will have a much better hilltop without it."¹⁰

Huntsman-Trout may be seen as a transitional figure. Many early landscape architects were plantmen first, designers second; as such, they had difficulty adapting to the less garden-like, more complex programs of this century. Huntsman-Trout, though an outstanding plantman, used plants to enhance rather than determine his designs. He used the design lessons of earlier centuries as abstract principles to inspire the handling of a particular site and program. In this way he adapted earlier traditions to serve the needs of this century.

As with many of his contemporaries, Huntsman-Trout relied on referrals for clients and apparently was not interested in having his work known outside his circle of friends, clients and collaborators. At the same time there was no tightly-knit group in Los Angeles, such as that which was centered in the Bay Area during the 1930's and '40's, which fostered critical discussion and the study of landscape architecture. Fortunately there is now an increasing interest in the work of Southern California's first landscape architects, those who offered the most idealized vision of what the real and mythic landscape of our adopted region could become.

*Figures 1, 2, 3 & 4 are courtesy of
The Department of Special Collections,
University Research Library, UCLA*

NOTES

1. These commissions were discussed in *Review*, Vol. 1, No. 3: "The 'Californian' Architecture of Gordon B. Kaufmann," Alison Clark.
2. Streetfield, David C., "The Evolution of the California Landscape: The Great Promotions," *Landscape Architecture*, May, 1977, p. 418.
3. Ray Page, interviewed by the author, February 23, 1981.
4. Beatrice Huntsman-Trout, interviewed by James Mink, November 27, 1976.
5. Philip Chandler, interviewed by the author, May 14, 1982.
6. Philip Chandler, interviewed by the author, May 14, 1982.
7. Philip Chandler, interviewed by the author, May 14, 1982.
8. Sturdevant, Roger, interviewed by Suzanne Reiss.
9. Beatrice Huntsman-Trout, interviewed by the author, October 12, 1981.
10. Edward Huntsman-Trout, letter to Claire Dentony, February 22, 1970.